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JAPANESE NURSERY NOTES.

BY ALBERT S. ASHMEAD, M.D., NEW YORK CITY.

IT has often been said that the Japanese are the most interesting, the strangest, even the quaintest, people we know. In no regard is this truer than in the care they take of their babies. Such a strong foundation is more necessary than elsewhere, to a nation where man is born to remain a baby his whole life. We, destined to exercise stronger and more serious minds, would be, at the very beginning of our existence, deteriorated by such ingenuous, untiring care.

I have spoken in another article[1] of the long-continued lactation of Japanese women, as benefiting both mother and child; also of the care taken of pregnant women, in which a solicitude displays itself, at the same time, clever and loving. This tender and intelligent attention paid to the born baby is the second part of that unique Japanese system of rearing healthy and happy men, which makes European and American ladies forget that so many other Japanese conceits are a severe shock to their feelings. During the dentition period the children have an extra diet, consisting of fish and small crustaceæ. Japanese not being a carnivorous people, this is natural enough. If they ate meat, they would give their children beef very likely. But it is certainly to the advantage of the bony structure of the child to be, on first entering the adult course of eating, fed in the Japanese manner.

The abominable diaper is unknown to the Japanese. They use only a breech-clout, which is removed at the moment of defecation. The child then is put in such a position that its legs straddle the arms, his body and head resting against the abdomen of the parent, who, gently rocking it in a certain rhythmical, tentative fashion, and accompanying his action with a kind of low whistling, reminding you of a lullaby, gives his offspring its first lesson in personal cleanliness, which, to the Japanese mind, is exceedingly next to godliness. It will be seen how, by this method, unnatural positions are avoided, a thing the more important that Japan is the country of worms, distomata, etc.

It is known probably to every reading person that Japan, like all oriental lands, is, for obvious reasons, furnitureless. It does not even know the cradle. As Diogenes made a cup of his hollow hand, thus the Japanese mother makes a cradle with the back of an older child, an ambulating, delightful cradle, where it stays from morning to night, and is unrhythmically rocked according to the chances and sports which the day offers to its patient and loving victim. Her back, of course, is its first cradle; when it wants the breast, it reaches over or under her arm for it.

The cause of the absence of furniture is the presence of tropical vermin. This awful presence is probably also the cause of the carpetless state of the nursery. The floor is covered with stuffed straw mats, thick and elastic; it is the usual floor of a Japanese house. The floor is mopped every day with salt water; it is, in fact, a chlorine wash. It must be remembered that in Japan the dirt of the street is not carried into the room, sandals and shoes being left at the front door. The necessity of keeping the floor in a sanitary condition is more important in Japan than anywhere else, because of the national habit not only of sitting, but sleeping on the floor.

There is a singular difference between the carriage of Japanese children and the way in which our children walk and move about. The Japanese urchin, whose feet never knew the unkind pressure of tight shoes, and, in fact, no pressure at all, walks more erect, is more sure-footed. In fair weather he wears flat straw-sandals; in these sandals the big toe is widely separated from the others, which gives the child a surer foundation. In wet weather he must maintain his equilibrium on his stilt-like wooden clogs, which keep his feet dry, at the same time compelling him to acquire an extraordinary power over his own motions.

There is in Japan no kissing, not even in the nursery. All the dangers, which have been so elequently described in newspapers some time ago, arising from the touch of lips, in human love directly, and at the communion table indirectly, are avoided by the national aversion for labial contact.

The sexes are separated at an early age, and the separation is maintained until marriage. After marriage the husband has a right to annex to his household as many concubines as his means allow. If his wife is delicate, she will perhaps suggest some friend of hers, who will prove rather an ally than a rival. At any rate, there will be no diminution of the friendship between the two women. When pregnancy occurs, a second concubine may be suggested, and no such addition ever troubles the quiet waters of a Japanese household. It is incredible of what amount of peace and, consequently, happiness, the absence of the green-monster alone may be the cause.

When she loses a child, the Japanese mother does not wring her hands and look up to heaven; she sits with folded hands, sunken head, her eyes looking into her lap. Japanese grief has been very eloquently described by my colleague in Japan, Professor Wernich, and I think it will be a good winding-up of this little article if I quote a passage of his remarkable book, "Geographico-Medical Studies:" "However often I have witnessed the death of dear relations, children, for instance, or husbands, I never had occasion to observe the wringing of hands, to which European women of the lower classes are so much addicted. A bitter sorrow was expressed through deep sinking of the head, grasping the hands together, shedding of tears. That strong mental agony, which digs into the soul, so to speak, and takes hold of it, like a bodily pain, seems to be unknown to them. They never 'turn to heaven their faces bathed in tears,' an action which to us seems not only natural and in perfect accord with the essence of grief, but is considered as beautiful and as a worthy subject of artistic representation. In prayers the Japanese mother does not lift her eyes to heaven; with bent head, the body somewhat shrunk together, with hands put together by the palms and slightly raised to the level of the chin, she sends her humble prayer, for quite concrete things, you may be sure, to Buddha."

NOTES AND NEWS.

PROFESSOR MARTIN, on account of his serious and prolonged ill health, has tendered his resignation of the professorship of biology which he has held in the Johns Hopkins University since 1876.

—The third volume of "Hermetic Philosophy," by Styx, has just been issued from the press of J. B. Lippincott Company of Philadelphia, completing the work. It is quite different in form from the other two volumes, being a dialogue in imitation of Plato on the question, "Can virtue and science be taught?" The author says in his preface: "Having already written two volumes on the essential teachings of the Hermetic Philosophy, and finding that they are not profitable attractions, as we hoped they would be, we have concluded to vary the performance." Whether the new volume will prove more attractive than the earlier ones or not may perhaps be doubted; but it is more readable, and contains much less of the peculiar stuff known as occultism than they did, though it contains enough for most readers. A large part of the book is taken up with ridicule of the "Christian scientists," which is suggestive of the dispute between the pot and the kettle; but a good deal of space is also devoted to setting forth the theosophical doctrine of reminiscence and reincarnation, or, in other words, the transmigration of souls. The question about the nature of virtue and whether virtue can be taught is discussed in various aspects; but the light that is shed upon it is rather what Milton calls "darkness visible." The production of several works of this kind in these times seems to us a singular phenomenon, hardly to be accounted for on ordinary principles; but it is apparently due to the general break-up of the old creeds, which has left a vacuum that men seek to fill with some doctrine or other, true, false, or nonsensical, as the case may be. For our part, we cannot conceive how any one can write such books, and, as we read them, we cannot help thinking that the authors do not really believe the doctrines they set forth.

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[1] "On the Non-Existence of Rachitis in Japan," Medical Record, Oct. 11, 1890.